

Kian O'Connor

"The rich should be obliged to give to the poor because they don't deserve what they have."

In 1859, Charles Darwin preached that one of the principal laws of nature is that "the strongest live and the weakest die".¹ Should this principle be applied to justify the acquisition and retention of wealth, and the concomitant wealth inequality in our society? A fundamentalist view of Darwinism may justify a level of inequality, but this apparently self-centred competitive approach could in fact be a major driving force for the advancement of the species as a collective rather than the success of individuals.

The vast wealth divide in society could result in greater investment and technological advances, despite the plight of economically deprived workers - it may not be the individual that counts but the fact the individual contributes to the overall success of the species matters. In terms of inequality, and the responsibility the affluent should have to support the economically disadvantaged, we may also question the morality of people hoarding wealth by examining how that wealth was obtained and retained. Having a wealth divide in society could be a driving force for human progress and advancement. The concentration of wealth into small "elites" could act as a sovereign fund to progress society. If we redistributed wealth, through the contemporary idea of a "Universal Basic Income", we lose the foundation of potential investment. Had Thomas Barnardo been subject to punitive taxation, or the Tate family of sugar barons had their business subject to wage or price caps, Britain would never have been enriched by the philanthropy of Barnardo's orphanages, or the culture-rich Tate Gallery.

However, philanthropy is not guaranteed with rich individuals, and some may hurt more disadvantaged people, but a Benthamite could claim that any investment, even if it is the purchase of a private jet, overwhelmingly provides more utility in terms of the employment and economic activity caused by said purchases - simply redistributing this could arguably make society as a whole poorer, in terms of purchasing power. There is a distinct moral difference that must be considered. If the Tate family had legitimately earned their money, in a free market where consumers were free to buy and sell, with an agreed price free of coercion, their wealth, and therefore their deserving right to retain it, could be legitimate. Purely from a utilitarian outlook, their empire, despite all the pleasure the Tate Gallery and its art provides to society, is illegitimate and could be redistributed. As the Tate Family's empire was built on the back of slaves in the Caribbean, it is laughable to suggest that the philanthropy undertaken by the family cleanses them of this sin. An immeasurable amount of life would have been affected by their decision to be comfortable in conducting business involving slaves, and so it simply would not be true to argue that the utility granted to society by said wealthy people is greater and therefore wealth inequalities are fairer than the complete lack of utility and liberty afforded to the slaves damaged by their conduct.

"Giving to the poor" conjures up images of fat cat billionaires living lives of luxury at the expense of poor, hardworking nurses. The tragedy of this instinctive visceral bias is that it completely neglects the benefits of economic activity. When somebody purchases a Rolex watch, or Bugatti Veyron, they are fuelling demand for products and creating or maintaining well-paid employment. Aristotle claimed, "persons who are equal should have assigned to them in equal things". Arguably, the wealth creation ability of wealthy individuals makes them economically more valuable than their poorer counterparts, and so wealth inequality could be justified as they contribute the greatest.

The danger with allowing vast inequality is that it affects the stability of society. In order for society to prosper and develop, we know it is important to have a healthy, safe and politically stable

environment. There are numerous examples of short-term economic exploitation which have led to a breakdown of social cohesion – and ultimately led to economic downturn. The inequality in Britain, shown by the Average CEO earning more than their averages workers salary in 3 daysⁱⁱ; if we fail to provide a “safety net” and an extensive social security system, we will fail to heed to the warning of Plutarch, who prophesied that economic inequality is the “fatal ailment for all republics”.

The lesson of history from longstanding, successful civilisations shows long-term state success is dependent on some form of redistribution of wealth, and of a social responsibility held by the wealthy that they have an obligation to help those who are less fortunate. John Rawls, who preaches a social contract devised behind a “veil of ignorance”,ⁱⁱⁱ with everyone gathering to choose what type of society they want to live in before their race, religion or economic status is known states: inequality can paradoxically exist in a fair, relatively equal society. This utopia would allow a disproportionate distribution of income and wealth, if this wealth works to the advantage of the least well-off members of society. Morally, it can be argued, the justification of retention of wealth is dependent on supporting the poor – whether through high tax rates contributing to the welfare state, or charity. One of the dangers of modern, global corporate systems is they create vast wealth with apparently little or no responsibility for reinvesting any of it back into society. If we continue with this trend, the long story of modern, liberal and capitalist democracies will come to an end.

Ultimately, history teaches us the lessons of history are the most successful states, have over the long term, recognised the importance of wealth redistribution in some form. Whether that is to create thriving markets, high employment, well paid jobs or a welfare state. Although inequality can exist, and the wealthy should deserve to retain their wealth to advance society, the sources and use of this wealth should come under scrutiny and occasionally redistributed in some sense, to maintain the survival of modern democracies.

ⁱ http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1861_OriginNY_F382.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jan/04/uk-ceos-make-more-in-first-three-days-of-2019-than-workers-annual-salary>

ⁱⁱⁱ SANDEL, M. Justice; What's the Right Thing to Do? Chapter 6